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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: AMIA ELECTIONS -- ORTHODOX BLOC WINS PLURALITY

¶1. (U) The Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA), held internal elections April 13. The Orthodox bloc, led by Rabbi Samuel Levin, won a plurality of votes in internal elections with 37.7% votes. AMIA, Argentina's most important and representative Jewish organization, suffered a 1994 terrorist attack at its headquarters that killed 85. Levin defeated Abraham Kaul's bloc, which received 33.3% of the vote and had been supported by current AMIA President Luis Grynwald. Kaul served as AMIA president in 2002-05 and represents the association's traditional moderate base. Rabbi Sergio Bergman's bloc, representing a new generation that calls for a return to religious values and emphasizes social assistance programs, came in third with 23.3% of the vote.

¶2. (U) The local press viewed Levin's victory as surprising, as many believed Kaul's bloc had the majority. Rabbi Bergman's late entry into the race may have siphoned off some support from Kaul, allowing Argentina's Orthodox Jewish community to win the elections for the first time in AMIA's history. After winning the election, Levin sought to assure the rest of the Jewish community that he would only "teach Orthodox beliefs, not impose them."

¶3. (U) The 90 elected delegates will meet to elect AMIA's new President and its Board of Directors on May 20. Since none of the competing blocs received an outright majority, the Presidency is still up for grabs and will depend on alliances forged over the next few weeks. According to some national media, however, Levin will not seek the presidency. The press speculates that he will direct his delegates to vote for Kaul, honoring an agreement the two leaders reportedly reached before the elections. Election participation rates were 40% -- a record high. A total of 7,341 people voted in the City of Buenos Aires and Gran Buenos Aires from a total of 18,600 members eligible to vote.

¶4. (U) Unlike previous elections, blocs did not represent affiliation with Israeli political parties, preferring to focus on religious and local issues affecting the Argentine Jewish community, such as conversions, the use of Jewish graveyards, mixed marriages, and education. One of the issues debated in the elections was how close the AMIA should be identified with the Kirchner administration. Kaul is publicly identified as a supporter of the Kirchners, while Bergman has been associated with the opposition. While both argued in favor of GOA efforts to continue its investigation and pursuit of justice in the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing and the 1994 AMIA bombing, Bergman cautioned against closely identifying the organization with the Kirchners. All candidates agreed to continue AMIA's efforts to urge the GOA to prosecute the "local connections" involved in the 1994 AMIA terrorist bombing. Both Kaul and Bergman characterized Kirchner henchman Luis D'Elia's relationships with Venezuela and Iran as a setback to improved interfaith relations with the potential to promote anti-Semitism in Argentina and the region.

COMMENT

¶15. (SBU) We bring AMIA's internal election to Washington's attention partly because of this NGO's importance to Argentina's large and well-established Jewish community, and because AMIA has become such a prominent ally in our counter-terrorist efforts. This election also marked young Rabbi Sergio Bergman's first campaign for office since gaining fame for joining 2006 public demonstrations for greater security in the wake of the 2004 Blumberg murder, in which a university student was kidnapped and killed after a botched rescue attempt by federal and Buenos Aires provincial police. The demonstrations tapped into Argentine middle class frustration with the government's inability to fight rising crime.

¶16. (SBU) During last year's Presidential and legislative elections, opposition leaders such as Elisa Carrio (Civic Coalition) and Mauricio Macri (PRO-Recrear) actively courted Bergman. However, he has been careful to keep himself from publicly aligning with one camp or the other, once confiding to poloff that his biggest challenge in 2007 was to stay out of electoral politics. He indicated that he has not ruled out running for office one day, but that the conditions in Argentina were not yet ripe. Until then, he plans to work with civil society actors to promote greater civic and citizen participation and has even written a book on the subject. His association with opposition figures, and late announcement of his intentions to run for the AMIA presidency, may have hurt his chances.

WAYNE